

# Reagan Backing Covert Actions, Officials Assert

By LESLIE H. GELB

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 13 — President Reagan has approved clandestine operations by the Central Intelligence Agency against what the Administration describes as Cuban arms supply lines in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America, according to Administration officials and Congressional sources.

Some of these covert actions, such as providing millions of dollars to what are called progressive and left-of-center groups and individuals in a number of countries, are said to be under way already.

Others, such as a paramilitary operation against what the Administration says are arms supply routes from Nicaragua to El Salvador, are still in the discussion stage with Latin American governments friendly to the United States, according to the officials.

## Dispute Over Makeup of Force

The officials said the discussions were snagged, particularly with Argentina, over the aims of the paramilitary operation and the makeup of the force.

Although Argentina wants to center the talks on overthrowing the Sandinist Government, the C.I.A. seeks to focus attention on the Cuban presence in Nicaragua, the officials said.

In addition, Argentina reportedly wants to include supporters of the deposed Nicaraguan Government of Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle in the force, while the C.I.A. is said to be trying exclude them.

In the last week, there have been conflicting news accounts of these activities.

On Wednesday, The Washington Post reported that President Reagan had approved a plan to invest \$19 million to build and finance a 500-man, American-supervised paramilitary force in Central America that would try to destabilize the Nicaraguan Government by attacking vital economic installations, such as dams and power stations.

According to interviews and documents obtained by The New York Times, the plan approved by Mr. Reagan calls for using the paramilitary unit to attack what the Administration says are Cuban arms supply lines in Central America.

On Thursday, The Times reported that senior Administration officials said Mr. Reagan had approved a plan to provide millions of dollars in covert financial aid to moderate political and economic forces in Nicaragua, but had rejected proposals to create a paramilitary force.

Officials have since confirmed that such a covert aid program is under way, unrelated to the \$19.95 million earmarked for the paramilitary force.

## Reagan Approves Idea of Force

The officials said, however, that Mr. Reagan had approved in general the idea of using a paramilitary force, while not specifying the exact role the C.I.A. should play.

It is not known whether the C.I.A. must return to the President for authorization to proceed with the actual creation of a paramilitary force once arrangements have been reached with other Latin American nations.

The officials and other sources sought to discredit earlier reports that the United States was the prime mover in the effort to set up a paramilitary operation against Nicaragua.

But they agreed that President Reagan had set in motion a covert intelligence operation for Central America and the Caribbean. In addition to paramilitary operations and financial support for those considered moderates, the plan also calls for establishing an intelligence-gathering network of local and United States agents.

One of the items made available was a document, signed by President Reagan on Dec. 1, 1981, asserting the need for a covert intelligence operation in the region. By law, the President has to sign such a document, called a finding, for all covert actions.

## C.I.A. Given Broad Authority

The document grants the C.I.A. a broad authorization to support and conduct political and paramilitary operations against Cubans and Cuban supply lines in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Central America. It further authorizes the C.I.A. to work with other governments.

A second document was an options paper prepared by the C.I.A. for discussion at the White House in mid-November. It listed a number of covert actions for the President's consideration, including a paramilitary one to destabilize the Nicaraguan economy and bring pressure on the Government in Managua.

The paramilitary option called for the C.I.A. to put together and finance a force of about 500 Latin Americans at a cost of \$19.95 million. This force could later be joined to a 1,000-man unit now being trained by Argentine military officers.

At meetings held at the White House in November, the sources said, it was noted that Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia and Honduras had been talking about and preparing for a similar operation for almost two years.

## No Support for Somoza Allies

It was agreed at the meetings that no support would be given to followers of General Somoza. This proved to be one of several stumbling blocks in subsequent negotiations with Argentina. Also, according to the officials, Honduras has yet to agree to allow a paramilitary force on its territory.

The paper and the meetings made clear, the officials said, that Americans would not be directly involved in the actual operations of the force. Two or three Spanish-speaking C.I.A. agents were to serve as liaison officers with the force, sharing intelligence and pointing out targets.

Officials traced the history of the enterprise back to last spring, when Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. said privately and publicly that there was a need to get to "the source" of trouble in the area, namely Cuba in the view of the Administration.

Evidence was growing as far as the Administration was concerned that Cuba was becoming the principal source, organizer and conduit for arms being sent to Nicaragua for supply to guerrillas in El Salvador and other anti-government forces in Central America.

## Pentagon Opposes Direct Force

Under Mr. Haig's direction, Robert C. McFarlane, who was then the State Department Counselor and is now deputy assistant to the President for national security, prepared several memorandums laying out a strategy for interrupting what were said to be Cuban arms shipments. The memorandums asked the Defense Department to prepare military options and the C.I.A. to study covert actions.

The Pentagon, particularly senior military officers, reacted strongly and negatively. The arguments were either that direct force would not work or that it would be too risky, especially in view of American commitments elsewhere in the world. As a result of these views, the officials said, Mr. Reagan decided against any use of force by American military units.

According to Congressional sources, the Administration notified the Senate and House Intelligence Committees of the covert actions, as required by law.

In those briefings, the sources said, questions were raised about the general nature of the document signed by President Reagan, suggesting that too much leeway might have been given to the C.I.A.